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THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.

Lesson VIII.—Second Quarter, For May 23, 1909.

THE INTERNATIONAL SERIES.

Text of the Lesson, Acts xv, 1-35. Memory Verses 28, 29—Golden Text, Acts xv, 11—Commentary Prepared by Rev. D. M. Stearns.

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Then, as now, the whole world lay in the wicked one, and to be a friend of the world meant to be the enemy of God, but from the world here and there God, by His Spirit through His servants, was gathering a people for His name, the church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood (verse 14; chapter xx, 28), a people not of the world whose citizenship is in heaven, strangers and pilgrims here because a part of Him who represents all believers before God. He is the only true center of His church, the heavenly center, but there are many earthly centers, and at the time of our lesson there were two great centers, Jerusalem and Antioch, supposed to be in perfect accord. At the former the apostles still lived, not having been scattered abroad, while the latter became the missionary center from which Paul and the others set forth on their missionary tours. The apostles at Jerusalem were supposed to have the truth on all matters concerning the church, as they had personally known and been intimate with that Lord.

Since the days of Cain there have always been false teachers, perverting the truth, holding down the truth and teaching everything but the truth for various reasons—for self exaltation, to please men, for money, etc.—but sometimes blindly fancying that they were indeed standing for the truth. The following passages show them up quite fully: Isa. xxix, 13; xxx, 9-12; Jer. xxiii, 21, 26; Ezek. xxxiv, 1, 2; Acts xx, 29, 30; II Tim. iv, 3, 4; II Pet. ii, 1-3; Jude 4, 11. The false teachers of our lesson insisted that no one could be saved unless they were circumcised according to the law of Moses, thus teaching that the finished work of Christ was really not finished or not sufficient in itself for salvation, but needed some goodness or obedience on the part of the believer to supplement it. These teachers were believers of some sort (verse 5), but did not understand the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 11) nor the forgiveness of sin through His blood alone. They did not seem to know that Abraham was saved before he was circumcised and that circumcision was a seal of the righteousness which he already had by faith (Rom. iv, 9-11).

There are many today who do not believe that by virtue of the atonement of the Lord Jesus He is made unto all who receive Him wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (I Cor. i, 30); that by the deeds of the law no one can be justified in the sight of God, but that Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth (Rom. x, 4). Paul and Barnabas stood for these foundation truths and disputed with the teachers from Judaea about them, but the church at Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas and some others to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem about this question (verse 2). On their way they declared the conversion of the gentiles as they had seen on their first tour and thus caused great joy to all the brethren. And when they reached Jerusalem they told to the church there all things that God had done with them (verse 4; compare xiv, 27). It is indeed worth while and a soul uplifting theme to show His wonderful works that He hath done, to talk of all His wondrous works, to declare His doings among the people (Ps. lxxviii, 4; cv, 2; Isa. xli, 4). All else is forgotten as thus we magnify Him and exalt His holy name.

But we must attend the council meeting at Jerusalem, where the apostles and elders and the church have gathered officially to consider the matters about which the delegates have come from Antioch. After much talk and disputing they settle down to business more quietly, and Peter gives his testimony concerning his visit to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius, and how as they heard the word of the gospel God gave them the Holy Ghost even as He had to the Jews at Pentecost, and he urged upon the council that there! but one salvation for Jew or gentile—namely, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas then declared the miracles and wonders God had wrought among the gentiles by them. James then summed up the case, and the result is given in the letter of verses 23-29. This letter they send to Antioch by Paul and Barnabas, commending them for their zeal, even to the laying down of their lives if necessary, and with them they send Judas and Silas to confirm the contents of the letter by their personal testimony (verses 25, 26, 27). They condemn the false teaching and set aside circumcision and the keeping of the law as essential to salvation, and they send the letter as not only from them, but from the Holy Ghost (verse 28).

Thus these messengers carried joyful tidings everywhere and great encouragement to simple faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If the decisions of all church councils were as wise and helpful it would be worth while holding them, but the greater number of them nowadays may be covered by the first line of verse 7 and are too largely a waste of precious time.

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